

D-DAY

by Steve Zeisler

The man we know best in Scripture as Abraham was first named Abram, "exalted father." The expanded version of his name, Abraham, means "father of a multitude" Both names are ironic. For years his name must have felt peculiar to him because this man who looms so large in Scripture, whose place in the story of the plan of God is so significant, was good at everything except fathering. From his earliest years, he succeeded in everything he set his hand to do. He was a great warrior, succeeding in battle against tremendous odds. He was a businessman who achieved success in all of his enterprises. In fact, the Scriptures report that by the end of his life he was a very wealthy man. He was a politician who successfully negotiated with the leaders of the tribes and nations of his day. He was held in respect by everyone for his leadership abilities. And he was a man who worshipped God. He established altars wherever he went and spoke often with God. He was a man whom the Lord God described as Abraham, my friend." (Isa. 41:8, James 2:23)

But the one thing he could not do was have children. His wife was barren, though year after year, decade after decade, they longed to have children. Eventually, this longing led to them making a wrong choice. Much human suffering has resulted from this decision to have a child by another woman. Still they waited for God to fulfill his promise to give them a son. Since the "exalted father" was unable to have children, he seemed unable to succeed in that which his name and God's specific promise announced for him.

But as the story unfolds, there is probably no better title for this man than "father." By the end of the story, he is father to a multitude with generation after generation stretching before him, though he certainly could not see them all. If ever a man in the history of the human race deserves the title of father, it is Abraham. In fact, he is the father of the Arab world today. With great pride, they claim their paternity in Abraham. He is also the father of the Jews as well. With the same pride, they look back and claim their paternity in Abraham. And Scriptures tell us he is the father of every person who believes in God for salvation. We as believers, as well as those physically descended from him, look to him as our father. It took a long time, but eventually Abraham's name became appropriate.

As a father figure, we are drawn to him as an example for us. I hope that your father is someone you look to as a good example, someone to emulate. If he is not, maybe this father can be your good example. I suggest we spend the next few weeks learning from him. First, let us look at the background material. We need to catch up to Genesis 12 where the story of Abraham begins. We first meet Abraham at the end of chapter 11. Look at Genesis 11:26-32:

And Terah lived seventy years, and became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. Now these are the records of the generations of Terah. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran; and Haran became the father of Lot. And Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. And Abraham and Nahor took wives for themselves. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai; and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah. And Sarai was barren; she had no child. And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife; and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans in order to enter the land of Canaan; and they went as far as Haran, and settled there. And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran.

This is a rather prosaic beginning to the story. Genesis 11:26 is the end of a lengthy genealogy which follows the usual pattern—So-and-so was the son of So-and-so, on and on—until we come to Terah and his sons. You might not notice that you had just turned a corner and were beginning the account that is the most magnificent of all

stories. Yet, even in these verses, we are hearing faintly the theme music that will become the most wonderful hymn imaginable. We have just been introduced to Abram, and in that introduction begins the story of salvation.

Many things take place in the opening chapters of Genesis, but in Gen.11:26 we have come to the beginning of something that is more significant and dramatic than we can imagine. Because of this, it will help us to look at what comes before.

The word "toledot" in Hebrew means generations, history, or an account. It is an anchor word in the opening chapters of Genesis which helps us to understand the book. In Gen.2:4, we are told: "These are the generations (or the history) of the heavens and the earth." This account included the creation of man and woman, the beginning of the human race. The events included the making of the cosmos, the physical universe, and the placing in the garden of people, the apex of God's creation. In Gen.5:1, the word is used again of Adam: "This is the book of the generations (history) of Adam." We find the genealogy and the story of Adam unfolding before us.

After God judged the world in the flood and Noah was left to restart the human race, we are told, "These are the generations (history) of Noah." And in chapter 10 the three sons of Noah are introduced the same way. In chapter 11, the word is used in a significant way. It makes sense for the heavens and the earth to have a history. It makes sense for the first man Adam to have a well-marked history. It makes sense for Noah, who restarts the race, to have a history and even for all of his sons to have one as they begin new nations and peoples. But in chapter 11, one of Noah's sons is singled out. Even though all three sons had children, Shem is given particular attention. (This same device was used in tracing the line from Adam to Noah.) In Gen.11:10, we are given Shem's line, and it is at the end of this genealogy that we find the verses we just read. Once again, the word "toledot" is used. Terah, out of all the people in Shem's line, has a noteworthy history. The ones who would follow him become important. This should make us ask, "Why is this line of people the focus? Why are we suddenly paying attention to them? What is going to happen?"

When we finally get to Terah and his children and specifically Abram, the magnificent leader of everything that would happen after him, we have come to "D-Day." Recall the history of the Second World War. The continent of Europe had been blitzkrieged by Nazi soldiers and taken over by a dark power committed to an evil future for mankind. All of the governments of Europe were in the control of the Nazis. This included the police forces and all of the official enterprises of life. The whole continent was subject to the command of the Nazis. Yet, finally, those who opposed them were able to gain a toehold on a beach in Normandy, France, where they were able to land troops and from there to expand to retake the continent.

When Abram was born into the world and called by God, a similar toehold was established. The Lord God said, "This whole earth and this people, thee children of Adam, have been dominated by the forces of wickedness long enough. Beginning now I am going to reclaim the continent." Abraham was Normandy. The salvation story begins with him. Starting with one man called to follow God, the territory is going to be regained. The prince of the power of the air, the ruler of this present darkness, is going to find his kingdom challenged and finally destroyed. And it all began with one man.

Let me ask you to consider what God had been doing during the period of occupation. No plan for salvation had been started. What he did in the early chapters of Genesis he is still doing today. I want to call your attention to four principles he maintains. Even though the planet and its people are controlled by the rebel, the Lord God still sets a limit to his reign. God still insists that during the occupation what is done in the name of wickedness only goes so far.

First, he established that sin has consequences. Even when there is no salvation message and no path of hope yet offered, the Lord required that the wages of sin be death. When Cain killed his brother, God banished him. There were consequences to his choice. When the wickedness of the earth became unbearable judgment in the form of a flood was brought to wipe away the filth created by human beings. We see this continuing to happen today. Nations decay from the inside because they have lost concern for righteousness. We have seen ancient and modern empires lose their strength. Nations crumble as a consequence of their sin. We see families crumble for

the same reason. Relationships deteriorate. Choosing to actively serve sin brings about punishment, the wrath of God. He takes his hand away and allows his wrath to be felt in the form of consequences.

Secondly, in these opening chapters of Genesis even before the Abrahamic story begins, God sets a limit on evil. When all the men of earth gathered and determined to build a monument to their own arrogance, a tower that would reach the sky, God said, "No! That is enough!" He confused the languages of earth so that it would be impossible to communicate effectively. And this project to honor the arrogance of man failed. The Lord God was saying, "There is a limit to what I will allow evil to accomplish."

This same limit abides still. However much wicked forces want to accomplish the most terrible things, they regularly fail. In order to be effective in any great enterprise, you need a certain amount of loyalty, cooperation, courage and other virtues, which the flesh cannot easily manufacture. The plans of the wicked often carry the seeds of their own destruction. The writer of Proverbs says in 1:17-19: "Indeed, it is useless to spread the net in the eyes of any bird; But they lie in wait for their own blood; they ambush their own lives. So are the ways of everyone who gains by violence, it takes away the life of its possessors."

Just as there are specific consequences to specific sin and limits set on how effective evil can be during the occupation, God also ensures that there will always be a remnant. In these early chapters of Genesis, reference is made to one individual after another—Seth, Enoch, Noah and people like them—who are different than the world they live in. They march to the beat of a different drummer and stand in stark relief against the willingness of others to follow the course of the world. These people are different because they love the Lord God. They live on a different basis; they live to his honor and glory.

I was reminded of the impact of the remnant who love God in the death of Jack Bradley. Jack was a long-time member of our congregation. A tall, handsome, distinguished Englishman, he was born into a patrician family, educated in the best schools, stroked for the Cambridge Eight, served in the Royal Navy, and fought with distinction and courage. Yet, despite all of these advantages, he rejected the expectations that accompany them and went a different way. He ended up in this country doing both small and great things. Coming to Christ and serving the Lord God, he became a man of wonderful hospitality and Christian outreach. He was different; he did not do what was expected. He did not take the course that was handed to him and follow it slavishly. And he stands out like a beacon reminding those who knew him that bonds and ruts are not the only possibilities for man. God has always had a remnant like Jack, people who live differently. They upset everybody because no one knows what to do with them. They are attractive and wonderful. They force those who know them to ask uncomfortable questions. What gives them strength and beauty when others are finding only death? Even during the early chapters of Genesis, when there was no salvation story as yet, God had a remnant. Against the awful conditions of Noah's day, there was Noah, a righteous man marching to a different drummer and standing out as a light in the world. There is always a remnant even in times of occupation by the forces of unrighteousness.

The fourth thing that we see in the opening chapters of Genesis is the whisper of a secret which never goes away. Eve was promised by God that she would have a son who would someday step on the serpent's head. With every child born to her, she wondered, "Is this the one?" Beginning with Eve there has been a whisper, a secret abroad in the world, that cannot be silenced. It whispers, "Maybe there is hope for us after all. Maybe there is a savior coming who will free us from these chains." Even when there was no salvation message, no clear announcement of how God would act, there was the whisper.

C.S. Lewis wrote in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, of his experience from youth of the stabbing pains of joy that were wonderful and eagerly sought. Nothing else mattered in comparison to them, yet he did not know how to find this joy. When he read the mythology of the Norse gods, he thought he found it in the "northernness," as he called it. Although he could not describe the feeling, he was never satisfied until he discovered its source. Even during the occupation, even when the prince of darkness controls all of the authorities and governments, he cannot stamp out the whisper of hope.

When you read Genesis you can hear the whisper in the genealogies of chapters 5 and 11. Look at Gen.11:20-26:

And Rue lived thirty-two years, and became the father of Serug; and Rue lived two hundred and seven years after he became the father of Serug, and he had other sons and daughters. And Serug lived thirty years, and became the father of Nahor, And Serug lived two hundred years after he became the father of Nahor, and he had other sons and daughters. And Nahor lived twenty-nine years, and became the father of Terah; and Nahor lived one hundred and nineteen years after he became the father of Terah, and he had other sons and daughters. And Terah lived seventy years, and became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran.

The pattern is rigidly established until Gen.11:26. So-and-so lived, had a particular son who is important and then he had other children to whom we pay no attention. That son had another son who is important, but we ignore the rest of his children, It is as if there is an expressed longing. A line is being followed because we are looking for something. There is a treasure to be found, and we keep hoping it will be in this generation or the next.

The Scripture is following the line looking for someone. It is the whisper of hope from which we cannot be free. And finally, when we come to Terah's family, we hear about all of the sons. All of Terah's children will be significant because of the leadership of Abram.

We have come to D-Day when the Lord God said, "The occupation has continued long enough. I will regain the territory and redeem this planet and these people. I am going to begin a march across the continent to win the territory for myself again." Although Abram would have a relatively small family, it would grow over a period of time to become a people, a nation, and finally a kingdom. Israel's physical presence became the message which brought about a spiritual kingdom spreading across the globe. The king has already come once in order to die so that life might be offered to the victims of the occupation. And he is coming again with a new heaven and a new earth—a new creation that will be brought about through the final destruction of the rebellion. Only life, beauty and light will remain. And all this began on D-Day when one man said yes to God and began the process of the salvation story.

The whole family of Abraham is important. Each member symbolizes some truth that we have come to see in our own lives and throughout history. Haran, one of the brothers of Abram, never left Ur of the Chaldeans, a Sumerian city filled with idolatry. He died before ever beginning the adventure of faith. Another brother, Nahor, began to travel with his father and Abram as they moved from southern Mesopotamia north and west to a city called Haran. He got that far but chose to stay there.

We have all known people who encountered the Christian life when we did. Some, like Haran, never take the adventure at all. They never take the first step of the life of faith. Others, like Nahor, start the adventure but in the end refuse to leave the rich, fertile valley between the rivers. They move all the way to the edge where real faith begins, but never go any further.

There are others like Lot who went on with Abram. He entered the promised land and stayed in touch with Abram until the end of his story. Like so many believers we are familiar with, Lot was willing to take the adventure of faith, but his life was fleshly. He basically served to help us see more clearly how faithful Abraham was. Lot's main role in life was to be a bad example so Abraham could rescue him. Their lives were like the before and after pictures of a diet advertisement. Lot's role in life was to stand in contrast with the man of faith. He was a believer, but one who accomplished very little in his walk with God.

Sarai, who would later become Sarah, was the beloved companion of Abraham. She struggled alongside of him, received the same promise, learned to trust the same God, failed with him and was redeemed with him. She was his loving companion all his life. She served with him and grew with him. .People similar to the members of Abraham's family are on the adventure of life all the time. We run into the same characters and the same influences over and over again. This family was the beginning because it was the group through whom the salvation story began. And even at the beginning, we can see symbolically the patterns that will appear over and over again.

As we close what has been basically a review of the setting for Abraham's story, I would like to ask you to review

your own life for a moment. The history of the human race is mirrored in the life of a single person. Have you noticed that? What happens on the biggest stage happens time and time again in the lives of individual people. We all began life in occupied territory. We experienced the same sovereign involvement of God that was noted in the opening chapters of Genesis. Even though we did not know, perhaps, that there was any other way to live we saw God bringing consequences to sin and limiting evil. We may even have known some of those people who refuse to buy the lies and who are not crushed by difficult circumstances. They stand out as remarkable examples of what humanity can be. Maybe we knew a Jack Bradley or Enoch or Noah. Maybe we could even hear the faint whisper, "There is hope!" But we did not know where to find it.

Yet for those who are now in Christ there came a day, D-Day, when the salvation story began for us. I am probably speaking to some who are not Christians. You may not yet believe that God can begin to change you from a small beachhead in your life, a change that will result in renewal now and will last forever. I urge you to be reconciled to God, to join the adventure. Be a part of the great tide that will eventually see the heavens and the earth recreated.

Most of you are Christians for whom D-Day has already taken place. The salvation story has begun, and the territory is being reclaimed by the Lord God. But there are many who have lost sight of the adventure; they do not see in themselves the extraordinary life Abraham had—fighting in a noble cause, worshiping God, growing in faith. His life is a great story! But many Christians have lost the sense of vitality.

The last verse of John's gospel says, "There are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books which were written." In some ways, every book that has ever been written is an attempt to comment on the story of Jesus—every poem, every diary, every work of literature, every expression of the heart of man bemoaning the loss of life, wishing somehow it could be found, or rejoicing that it has. Everything that has ever been written is a commentary on the news about Jesus. And the world itself can not contain all the books about God at work if all of them were to be written. The end of human history will record the triumph of righteousness.

It is good news! It is exciting! It is worth living for! The vitality of what it means to be a Christian is worth capturing again for ourselves and worth sharing with others. C.S. Lewis after coming to Christ wrote a famous series of children's stories, The Chronicles of Narnia, in which the central figure, Jesus Christ, is portrayed as a lion named Aslan. The last paragraph of the Chronicles reads:

And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever; in which every chapter is better than the one before.

The story of God winning back this race began with Abram, the exalted father. God said, "I will regain the territory. I will not just save a handful as a remnant. I am going to remake everything. I am going to give this race the life it refused in Adam." It is the greatest of all stories, and it ought to be experienced by us individually as an adventure. I want to close with the words of Paul. If you are not a Christian, I want you to consider, "Why not join the adventure?" Take the step of faith to become part of the seed of Abraham. If you are a Christian and your walk has become stale, ask yourself why there is no vitality any more. Why do we not believe this is the greatest story imaginable, the greatest hymn ever sung? Determine to take some steps to remove whatever is blocking the life we can have. Speaking of himself in Philippians 3:13-14, Paul said, "Forgetting what lies behind, and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

May it be so for each of us.

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